Art professor mends communities with broken tiles

The American cultural debate over earmarking federal funds for public art has been fought from the art studio to city hall to political rallies. Opponents of public art projects call them eyesores, moral corruptions or a misuse of tax dollars. But a few artists are changing the hearts of the staunchest critics.

Few could argue against the public art mosaics of Beryl Solla. She's taking broken tiles and mending communities. Solla's creative process makes art happen in a way that makes every project a winner, without adding to the cost.

"I believe that public art should reflect the needs and interests of the people in the community," says Solla. "When possible, I involve community members in my art by incorporating their history or by inviting them to make tiles with me."

She's far too modest.

JoAnn Loctav, coauthor of Mosaic Design, describes Solla's work truer to form. "For Solla, mosaic is a metaphor: broken tile that mends shattered lives."

In the centuries-old technique of mosaic art, fragments of glass, ceramic, stone and clay are pieced together to create intricate patterns within a unified whole. Solla has used the technique to pull together the pieces of communities large and small.

In Coral Springs, Fla., at the Booher Addiction and Recovery Center for women, Solla designed Home of the Brave, which she named for the individual bravery of its inhabitants. "These women were at their lowest," she says. "They were former prostitutes, women with severe addictions, women who had lost their children."

Through a state grant-funded program, the Broward County Art and Design Committee commissioned Solla to do a piece for the center's main entrance. Solla could have easily researched a 12-step program on the Internet or read an Alcoholics Anonymous brochure, but she chose to meet the misery of addiction

face to face. "This center is a lifeboat for these women," says Solla. "The cooks work hard; the counselors work so hard for these women. And they, in turn, work hard to recover and get their lives back."

Solla interviewed everyone from cook to counselor to addict and decided on a mural of symbolism - a piece featuring colorful hearts and hands in broken tiles set against a black and white background. "Some of the women helped make tiles and some chose to write affirmations on tiles shaped like their hands," says Solla, remembering vivid details of each addict's story. Some could only write, 'I will get my kids back.' But each affirmation meant so very much to these women."

Now their affirmations permanently color the center's entrance, where newly recovering addicts begin a journey out of the dark hole of addiction. Solla's work so inspired the center's staff, that they applied for a second grant and invited her to do a second mosaic - a tiled patio and fountain.

"I believe in the ability of art to communicate in real ways, not just aesthetically," says Solla. "That's why I have community members help make tiles, discuss content or install the mosaics. I love teaching and involving my students in these community projects. I tell my students, 'why wait for some gallery director to never call; get out in the community and put your energy to good use.'"

Solla began her fourth year teaching two-dimensional and three-dimensional drawing and general education art classes at JMU this fall. She gave up an 18-year tenured faculty position at Barry University in Miami, when she and her husband decided that they wanted to raise their children in place more community oriented. "We researched the whole country," she says. "We found the best climate, quality of life and sense of community in this part of Virginia."

Solla's sense of community was instilled by an undergraduate art professor at the Florida Institute for Undergraduates. "I named my first son after him," she says. "He taught me about the artist's responsibility to community, and it is so true. Even before I began public art, my individual expressions were socially conscious."

Solla has been working on large-scale public art and community-based art projects for more than 10 years. She has led numerous workshops for children and teachers, and designed and presented workshops for Dade County Public School teachers, emphasizing art as a learning tool that can be used throughout the curriculum.

"Public art projects should be community-based and reflect the people and history of the area," says Solla. "I always engage the community in my sculpture and mosaics, either conceptually or directly. In Top Ten Things, Jump and Ramblewood, adults and children from the communities actually made tiles that were permanently placed in these pieces [at Saint Agnes Rainbow Village, Florida International University and Ramblewood Elementary in Coral Springs, Fla.]," says Solla.

Through a home-based business - arts-ville.com - Solla also promotes her tile projects for homes and offices. "I've even tiled a toaster," boasts Solla.

In one of the roughest, racially divided communities in Richmond, Solla helped local police reach out to the public. "We invited the police chief and several officers and community leaders to come together and work on this mosaic," says Solla. "Our concept involved a line of human shapes holding hands, but it was hard to get some of our participants to even hold hands for a photograph."

The mosaic, commissioned for the police station's street sign, is 15-feet tall and features a yellow police badge over a black and white background. "The police wanted to instill a sense of mutual trust in the community," says Solla. "So, the silhouettes of policemen and community members are each a little black and a little white. By the end of our project, some of the participants became the best of friends."

Broken tiles transforming lives.

There is no association, gallery or museum in the United States dedicated to mosaic art. Beryl Solla doesn't need one. Her art lives in the hearts of each community member she has touched.

"JMU has the opportunity to touch this community through art," says Solla, "with the center for the arts project."

The $41.6 million Fine and Performing Arts Complex is part of the university's Centennial Plan. The center will house the School of Theatre and Dance. Plans to double the size of Duke Hall, which houses the

School of Art and Art History, are also included in the plan and will raise the cost of the project an additional $24.6 million.

"We can't continue to make magic with nothing," says Cole Welter, director of the JMU School of Art and Art History. "We need to change our pattern of giving."

"The center for the arts will be impressive," says William Buck, director of the School of Theatre and Dance, "But, it will not be a luxury. Accreditors of our theater and dance programs have cited our current facilities deficient."

To support JMU's center for the arts, contact the Development Office at (800) 296 - 6162.

Story by Michelle Hite ('88)